'IT WAS FROM LOVE HE BLABBED TO ME!'[1]
RE-CONSTRUCTING PUŠKIN'S ROMANTIC TRAGEDY: THE POETICS AND POESIS OF PROVOCATION. THE PRE-TEXTS WITHIN THE TEXT OF *BORIS GODUNOV*

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In this brief paper I but aim to invite attention to a possible way of interpreting Pushkin's historical play, *Boris Godunov.* I shall attempt to trace a particular poetical mechanism employed by Pushkin in a very consequent and conscious way throughout his historical play. I will call this mechanism 'the poetics of provocation', wherein the original sense of the Latin verb *provoco* is to be understood: '*to call out, challenge, invite* one to any thing'.[2] The particular way this Pushkinian dramatic text is 'being made'[3], or organized, by the means of what I will hereby term the 'poetics of provocation', has a special bearing on how the *sujet* of this play unfolds. I have previously published a number of articles on the poetics and composition of the Pushkinian 'romantic tragedy';[4] those papers mostly discuss the problem of the poetical presentation of history and the place of 'historiography' in a poetical context (i.e. in a poetical work), whereas in this present paper I am solely focusing upon one particular aspect of the poetics of *Boris Godunov,* this time regardless to any links to history (or historiography) whatsoever as presented in this drama.

To start with, let us first identify the three main literary pretexts that definitely underlie the poetics of provocation as applied by the poet in the text of *Boris Godunov.* These three pretexts are resp.: 1. the 'Mousetrap' scene in *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* by Shakespeare; 2. Homer's *Odyssey;* 3. the scene of Gloucester and Lady Anne in *The Tragedy of King Richard III* by Shakespeare. The common feature in all three pretexts is the action of *challenge* put in the focus of these texts. In both Shakespearian examples, the protagonist (Hamlet and Gloucester resp.) with much care prepares a situation wherein he is able to *challenge* his coun-

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[1] The English translation of *Boris Godunov* is cited from The Gutenberg Project's English text (see 'Works Consulted' after the main text)

[2] Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary.* http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0059%3Aentry%3D%2339229

[3] The term 'poetics', which was presumably first used in this sense by Aristotle, is derived from the Greek verb *poieô,* meaning 'to make [sth]', thus *Poiêtikê technê,* the Greek title of Aristotle's *Poetics,* could be rendered as 'the way [a particular piece of] poetry [is] made'.

[4] See the list of my papers on *Boris Godunov* in the Select Bibliography at the end of this article.

terpart and as a result secure for himself the dominant position over his partner which he definitely needs to execute his plans in the play onwards. As for the *Odyssey,* it is the series of Odyssesus' adventures, or 'challenges', and the responses he offers to them (including, as a matter of course, the epical hero's 'wise ways' of avoiding disaster menacing him and his companions) that place the epic among the literary pretexts of *Boris Godunov.*

If we look at the 'Mousetrap' scene in *Hamlet,* it becomes clear at the very moment as the title of this 'play-in-the-play' emerges that Hamlet, the 'stage-director', is setting a trap into which he calculates to entice his opponent, the king, forcing him to publicly 'truelier discern [his] secret thoughts'. Is it not Prince Shuisky who, if in a more courteous manner than the Danish prince – as a 'wily courtier' (true, in this respect not resembling the Danish heir to the throne) –, lets Prince Vorotinsky walk into his cleverly-devised trap of 'feigned calumny'? Both Hamlet and Shuisky succeed in their calculations. Similar, perhaps to some extent blunter, is Gloucester's case in Act I Scene II of *King Richard III,* where he, to secure for himself the throne (to which he, akin to Hamlet, claims to be the 'heir'[5]), chases his counterpart into an ingeniously built trap. As a result of these manoeuvres, the dramatic heroes (one of them an ever-hesitating legal heir, the other a resolute pretender-Machiavellist) are provided free way to attain the highest power.[6] Third, *mutatis mutandis,* practically the same is applicable to the figure of Odysseus: a considerable portion of the actions he performs throughout the *Odyssey* should be seen as setting his 'mousetraps' (and at the same time slipping out of traps set for him by others), his adequate responses to these challenges marking the road that in the end leads toward his re-seizing his throne (to which he, too, is the actual legal heir).

The main point of this paper is to show, and illustrate with relevant examples, that the composition and the poetical structure of Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* is based upon a 'series of provocations'. A part of these 'provocations' lies outside the Pushkin text, constituting the play's 'outside pretexts' which as a rule are quite numerous and some of which we have identified above (*Hamlet, Richard III* and *The Odyssey*). By definition, a pretext (in the English language often spelt with a dash: 'pre-text') of a given literary text is normally another piece of text that in its temporary existence is prior to the 'main text' and has, in some way or another, contributed to the latter's coming to being. In other words, a pre-text is a stimulus

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[5] From this point of view it should barely matter that whereas the Danish prince is actually the legal heir and the plot of *Hamlet* is by and large determined by this very status quo, Gloucester, on the other hand, is a genuine and self-made usurper, one who is 'determined to prove a villain'. Because the resp. dramatic situations and their structure are so intrinsically akin to one another, their comparison seems fully adequate on this ground.

[6] That Hamlet eventually *fails* to seize the throne which he is true heir to does in no way undermine the superb effectiveness of the 'trap' he has previously set for Claudius. The 'poetics of provocation' does a truly excellent job here, playing a crucial role in the poetic structure of this Shakespearian tragedy throughout, quite akin to the way it operates in *Boris Godunov.*

for the text; it is obvious to state that there is no one literary text without a series of pre-texts. More relevant from the point of view of the present study is, however, the other group of pretexts which I call 'inner pretexts'. These latter lie at the bottom of what I hereby call 'poetics of provocation' and set the provocations in motion which actually trigger the advance, or the motion, of the *sujet*.

As it has been indicated above, the compositional backbone of the drama can best be located along the series of provocations formulated by several of the characters throughout the play. The overwhelming supremacy of rumour over facts, or events, has been stressed by Caryl Emerson[7] and Kevin Moss[8] in their interpretations of *Boris Godunov*. Emerson, in her monograph dedicated to the Boris Godunov-theme, formulates that 'Pushkin's plot, like the Boris tale at its base, is itself a samozvanets, a pretender that invites and engenders response without identifying any source of authority within itself' (EMERSON 1986: 103). Emerson's statement is remarkable in that she defines 'Pushkin's plot' as something equivalent with 'samozvanets', this latter being one of the numerous names, or masks, that Pushkin grants Grigorii-Pretender on the stage. I would even go further than that: it is not merely the 'plot' of the play that demonstrates a close analogy with 'a samozvanets', or 'the' samozvanets; it is the *sujet* of the drama that can be interpreted as 'a pretender'. The purport of the equivalence of 'Pushkin's plot' with 'a samozvanets, a pretender that invites and engenders response without identifying any source of authority within itself' can best be assessed by feeling out the backbone of the drama, i.e. by locating and interpreting those acts of 'provocation' which seem to have basic relevance to the poetical structure or, with other words, which are responsible for the composition of the play.

In one of my earlier articles I analysed two 'acts of provocation' in Pushkin's *Boris Godunov,* emphasizing the parallel construction and the tight poetical bond between these as engendered by the acts of provocation and the recurrent use of the motif of *silence* in both dialogues (MEZŐSI 1997b: 250–253). The two dialogues analysed were the one between the princes Shuisky and Vorotinsky right at the beginning of the play and the one between Marina and the Pretender in the Fountain scene. In both passages the point is concealed in the last line when the speaker comes forth with the explanation why it would not be (have been) expedient for him in the given situation to reveal the actual truth. In Shuisky's speech the emphasis in this line is on *silence*: of the five words in the Russian text two explicitly express silence (*deaf* and *silently*), and two others refer implicitly to it (*dungeon* and *strangled*). The words are arranged in a finely balanced symmetry so that each explicit 'silence-word' is supported by an implicit reference to 'silence'. The supplementation in both pairs of words serves the same purpose, viz. to lend a

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[7] 'Events matter less than rumors about events and everyone with a story to tell is aware of the power of storytelling' (EMERSON 1986: 140).

[8] 'Far from presenting a final version of the historical facts, the play is a collage of versions, rumors, stories; no appeal can be made to any fixed value' (MOSS 1988: 187).

sombre and sinister meaning to the originally neutral semantics. Thus the force of the verbal structure is significantly enhanced. The verb is placed in an emphasized position: at the end of the line (and the sentence). It should be noted that the words which semantically support the whole sentence, in this case are not equivalent to those that grammatically govern the clause (*deaf* is an epithet of a noun, *silently* an adverb depending on a verb). In his speech the Pretender 'predicts' to Marina that she is not going to unmask him because if she tried, she 'will be silenced'. It is the motif of silence (silencing) again that ends the speech. The verb *molchat' zastavyat* (*they will force to hold thy peace*) is set at the end of the line and the sentence (remember the position of *b zadavili* (*strangled*) in Shuisky's speech. The use of the words *molchat' zastaviat* by the Pretender here is of course euphemism: it is clear that he actually means that she 'will be murdered', which is equal in rank with the verb 'strangled' used by Shuisky. This part of the dialogue between Marina and the Pretender therefore unambiguously recalls Shuisky's and Vorotinsky's discourse – just as the striking ending of the drama will pick up the Shuisky-Vorotinsky scene *and* the scene of Marina and the Pretender. Godunov's family being *strangled* and the astonished *silence* of the Moscow people, refusing to hail 'the tsar Dimitry Ivanovich', thus both have their anticipations back in the play, heavily supported by a recurrence of motifs.

Grishka Otrepiev's and Marina Mnishek's moonlit rendezvous is in fact the two partners' mutual testing of one another or, in other words, an act of subjecting each other to a trial without which they could hardly ever become a kingly couple. True, as they are devoid of that 'love of Love', the 'passion [that] fully strives to make itself […] fair and admired', which has made Shakespeare's Mark Antony and Cleopatra perhaps the kingliest among all couples in the history of literature, neither the Samozvanets nor Marina can afford themselves to 'let […] the wide arch / of the ranged empire fall'. As a result, the rendezvous scene in *Boris Godunov* stages no 'true love'; instead, we can follow a remarkable poetic parody of romantic love. It is this very parody of love that finally renders the Pretender a firm and resolute strategist, and throughout the entire Fountain scene it is only once that he is referred to by the poet as 'Dimitry', viz. upon making his decision to launch the military operation against Moscow. 'The phantom of the Terrible hath made me / His son; from out the sepulchre hath named me / Dimitry', 'I am tsarevich' – proclaims the Pretender 'proudly' (Pushkin's stage direction). This scene is but one, yet of decisive importance, in the series of dialogues that constitutes what may be called the 'tug-of-war around legitimacy'.

In the course of the play Shuisky is the first to act as challenger, provoking Vorotinsky, Afanasii Pushkin and Godunov resp. The crucial act of provocation, however, is allotted to Pimen who provokes – in other words: stirs up – his pupil, Otrepiev to launch the 'bold fraud'. The Pretender's scene with Marina displays, instead of 'lovers' tender speeches', 'sweet love' and the like, a tough match, a duel, whose actual stake is to mutually test the adversary (rather than the 'partner'),

to seek 'but by feigned calumny to prove [one another], / the truelier to discern [one another's] secret thoughts'. These lines had been uttered by Shuisky to explain his recent cunning ways, yet the ending of the Fountain scene unmistakably echoes them, together with the prince's plain explanation of his refusal to 'remember' the previous discourse with Vorotinsky: ' 'tis not / The time for recollection. There are times / When I should counsel you not to remember, / But even to forget.' With Shuisky setting his trap, then revealing his own inner motivations, the text of this scene clearly outlines a 'provocation structure' which from this point is to become a poetic standard for the play. In its functioning, this structure is entirely based on, and is fed by, the *rumours* circulating around the tsarevich Dimitry. The poetical function of the discourses between Shuisky and Vorotinsky is to launch, to put into motion, this provocation structure. In the first phase of this structure having been put in action, the provocateur's partner (prince Vorotinsky) fails to produce an adequate answer of any kind whatsoever; in the next phase, in Pimen's cell, the ability or unability of the provoked to come forth with a relevant response to the provocation is explicitly, of course, nowhere expressed within the monastery scene. Yet the two motifs that definitely mark Grigory's figure here, his dream at the beginning and his solemn oath at the end of the scene (both referring to the novice's high ambitions), seem unambiguously to point toward some kind of powerful response on behalf of the provoked. The third phase of the provocation structure[9] working in full swing is the Fountain scene. Here the provocation becomes mutual in that both parties strive to find out the other's inner motives and thoughts. The explanation Shuisky offers Vorotinsky about his altered position as regards 'remembering' what they were talking about earlier may as well be applied in the Fountain scene: 'I sought but by feigned calumny to prove thee, / The truelier to discern thy secret thoughts.' The 'feigned calumny' by the fountain is the Pretender's 'sweet love', his 'tender speeches', and it is the first instance in the course of the plot that the party provoked (Marina) is explicitly capable of providing adequate response to the provocation – just to strengthen her challenger in his position. Thus a refined yet powerful system of bonds is being created via an excessively sophisticated and ingenious handling of recurrent motifs which link the opening scenes (the actual launching of the 'provocation machinery') and the 'feigned love scene' by the fountain: 1) the motif of strangling, 2) the motif of silence and 3) the motif of 'feigned calunmy […] to discern [the partner's] secret thoughts'. All three motifs will recur in one single flash at the end of the play: Godunov's family being strangled (1), the silence (2) of the people and the people being provoked to 'the truelier to discern [its] secret thoughts' (3) about 'tsar Dimitry Ivanovich'. Yet the provocateur's attempt to 'seek by feigned calumny to prove' the other party, for the

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[9] We can, of course, witness numerous other instances of provocation in the plot (Shuisky and Pushkin, Pushkin and Basmanov, the 'strange provocation' between Shuisky and the patriarch), yet the four phases presented here should cast sufficient light on the role of provocation in the poetics of the play.

first time in the play, turns out to be a total failure, thus fostering the collapse of the 'provocation structure'. The fourth and final phase in the action of the 'provocation structure' is being put together (that is, 'composed', from Lat. 'compono, -ere' meaning 'to put together, assemble') by the end of the play. At this point it is the reader/audience, continuously having been challenged and provoked by the author throughout the drama, who on the level of reception will 'act' as competent partner to the latter, being capable of giving adequate response(s) to his or her provoker. The micro-network of the acts of provocation delivered on the stage in *Boris Godunov* thus outlines a broader poetical dimension via the brilliant employment of the structure of recurrent motifs.

      The drama *Boris Godunov* is launched with an allusion to an event that lies outside the play itself – an 'event' that may or may not actually have taken place. Curiously, it is not *the event* (Godunov's alleged murder of the tsarevich) that really matters in this play but the *rumours* circulating around this event. So much so that not only the dramatic plot itself is triggered by these rumours and their reception by the dramatic characters (in the monastery scene and onwards), but also the main point of the play's opening scene (which from a formal dramaturgic angle may be but of little relevance) concentrates heavily and exclusively on the rumours spreading among contemporary Russians about the hows and the whys of Godunov's rise. Rumour thus becomes the 'proto-provocation' (or the 'archetype of provocations'), i.e. the actual pre(-)text, of the play in a dual sense: on the one hand, it is this specific rumour that sets the dramatic action in motion *and,* on the other, this rumour constitutes the actual pre-text for the dramatic text in that it is a live *text* which is being transmitted and made public exclusively orally (never is it fixed or otherwise canonized in an explicit form inside the play). An important phase, in fact a turning-point or a *sine qua non*, in this evolution of the rumour-pretext is doubtlessly Pimen's chronicle: the *pretextual* character of the rumours and gossips about the Boris-tale is reshaped into a *text* by the mere act of *telling*, recalling (or *remembering*[10]) the story otherwise broadly familiar by then, thus rendering the rumour into an *event*. A still more advanced phase of the process is what Otrepiev has to add to it when he 'makes his own self', realizing his 'bold fraud' of 'be[ing] tsar in Moscow'. As we have seen, the first three phases in the process of pretext (rumour) becoming text (narrative) are all definitely marked by acts of challenge, provocation, and by what response to them the other party is capable of. From the Fountain scene onwards, the 'Boris-tale' is no more a pretext: due to his duel with Marina Mnishek the Samozvanets manages to 'make himself', that is, secures his redemption and rebirth; as a result, the pretext now becomes a

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[10] Note again what Shuisky has to say about the position he actually occupies: ' 'tis not / The time for recollection. There are times / When I should counsel you not to remember, / But even to forget.'

valid text.[11] However, Dimitry-Samozvanets, simultaneously with his 'rebirth', defines himself before Marina as 'a *pretext* for revolt and war'. The circle thus comes full (not for the last time in the course of the play): upon creating his text out of the pretext that was originally available to him, the Pretender interprets his own self as a pretext. The context of this statement brings us to realize the motif of *rumour* being re-smuggled into the dramatic text.[12] Which implies, consequently, that this figure, himself 'a *pretext* for revolt and war', seems in some way to bear responsibility for the text – which has thus become identified with 'revolt and war' to come (cf. the Holy Fool's lament in the end of the Musorgsky opera which makes this connexion explicit), as well as with the remainder of the dramatic text of *Boris Godunov.* That the Pretender declares himself a 'pretext for revolt and war', sets his position aright that appeared but for a moment (due to Marina's re-challenging him) put out of joint. Thus Dimitry is restituted by the Samozvanets-figure due to which the play, along with the Pretender's political career, is saved. The final result is, then, the dramatic text which as a rule is constituted by and in the course of reception.

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[11] This is of course not to say that the Boris-tale at this point would 'suddenly' prove to be 'true'. It is to say not more, and not less, than that the Boris-tale, in its first appearance a widespread gossip, starts vindicating for itself features that gradually turn it into a text within the drama, regardless to what extent is that text 'true or false'.

[12] The Pretender's words about the *rumours* that can possibly be expected around his person:

'Think'st thou
They will believe a Polish maiden more
Than Russia's own tsarevich? Know, proud lady,
That neither king, nor pope, nor nobles trouble
Whether my words be true, whether I be
Dimitry or another.'

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Резюме

«Он из любви со мною проболтался!»

Опыт интерпретации романтической трагедии Пушкина: поэтика и поэзия провокации. Внутренние пре(-)тексты текста «Бориса Годунова»

Настоящая статья предлагает некоторые новые точки зрения для поэтической интерпретации пушкинской исторической драмы «Борис Годунов». Предметом исследования станет «поэтика провокации» в данной пьесе. Целью этого очерка является показывать, что композиция и поэтическая структура «Бориса Годунова» опирается на серию провокаций, осуществляющейся

в драматическом тексте. Первичным внутренним претекстом для пьесы является не факты или события, а слухи.

Предлагается текстовой анализ возвращающих речей двух «действий провокации» из драматического текста (анализуруются мотивы «задавить» и «тишина»). Показывается путь эволюции претекста (слух) к тексту (к нарративе) внутри драматического сюжета. Называющий себя Самозванец «предлогом», т. е. претекстом, вернет мотив слух в драматический текст, заключая круг. Из этого следует, что эта фигура, определяющаяся самой собою как «предлог раздоров и войны», станет отвечать за весь текст драмы. Конечным итогом этого процесса является драматический текст, который созидается единственно через рецепцию читателя/зрителя.